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AUTHOR Root, Robert L., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted over a two-year period to investigate the idea-generating strategies of six professional writers and their implications for students. Because finding an idea that leads to a journal or newspaper column is so important to a writer, an attempt was made to learn ways professional writers establish working plans and develop a knowledge of the topic through long-term memory. It was found that they are "assiduous string savers," accumulators of quotes or notes stored from memory and written clippings to be used for triggering associations--to generate new ideas and to discover connections. The writers' testimony demonstrates that the work of a professional writer is facilitated by an extensive storage of professional information or an immersion in the context of the profession. This immersion frees the writer from the short-term demands of discovery that student writers usually encounter. The greater the understanding of the subject, the greater the potential for making connections spontaneously. In that respect, there is a gulf between professional and student writers, which implies that students need a context to draw upon. Possibly, this context and experience need to be provided for them in rhetoric classes. (EL)

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Robert L. Root, Jr.
Department of English
Central Michigan University
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859

# "'Assiduous String-Savers': The Idea-Generating Strategies of Professional Expository Writers"

In the course of the past two years I have conducted interviews with professional expository writers concerning specific articles they have written immediately prior to the interview. In several cases I have had access to notes, initial drafts, revisions, and final text for comparison. Having limited my selection of subjects to writers who regularly produce expository prose under the constraints of a rigorous deadline, a specific task, and a particular audience--constraints similar to those imposed on student writers in composition courses--I have been investigating both the relationship of professional practice to pedagogical paradigms and prescriptions imposed on student writers and also the reliability of theoretical models of composing as descriptions of the typical process undergone by professional practitioners (Root, 1983, 1985).

The cognitive process model of composition developed by Linda Flower and John Hayes has been particularly useful as a description of the writing process experienced by my subjects, especially as it pertains to idea-generation strategies. Flower and Hayes break down the writer's process of composition into planning, translating, and reviewing, and divide the planning process further into the

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sub-processes of generating, organizing, and goal setting (Flower, p. 370.) Especially significant for understanding idea-generating, they include the writer's long-term memory and the task environment as essential elements continually interacting with the writing processes. If this model is indeed reliable, research into the composing processes of professional expository writers ought to determine the extent to which planning interacts with long-term memory and task environment and discover as well practical applications drawn from concrete examples. What, in other words, are the idea-generating strategies of professional writers and what are their implications for students?

For each of the professional expository writers I interviewed, the task environment was predictable and regular. Tom Wicker, columnist for The New York Times, and Richard Reeves, syndicated columnist, both wrote two articles per week on political topics, each being limited to a length of around 750 words, the equivalent of a two-page double-spaced freshman theme. David Denby, film critic for New York Magazine, and Walter Kerr, drama critic for The New York Times, each had to produce at least one column per week, in a range of 1200 to 1500 words. Neal Gabler, film critic at that time for Monthly Detroit and co-host of PBS' Sneak Previews, had one monthly column of 1600 words for the magazine and two weekly 1 and 1/2 minute reviews for the television series. Susan Nykamp, then managing editor for

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Photo Marketing, had to produce a major article every other month plus additional monthly short items for her magazine.

The task environments in these cases are not only important for the ways they impinge immediately upon the writing processes but also for the ways they establish both writing plans and also a knowledge of the topic in long-term memory. In his book on the media, On Press, Tom Wicker writes:

> Political reporters should be, and most are, assiduous "string-savers." Some quote not apropos in today's story may be just right for next's; or some note jotted down on one story may mesh with another from a second story to make still a third. "Stored" in this fashion, in the long memory any newspaperman ought to have, almost any kind of information may become useful to a reporter. (Wicker, 1978, p. 49).

In fact, this kind of "assiduous string-saving" is exactly the method that professional writers in every field rely upon for the generation of ideas.

Tom Wicker claims to have an "elephantine memory" and a capability for drawing upon it regularly in his writing. In addition to memory he keeps clips of items he's culled from the newspaper. As he says,

> If I picked up the paper this morning and read a particular story, it might well trigger something and I know I've got something in [my file] that pairs up with



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that, or contradicts it, and I could pull it out. (Wicker, 1982)

The triggering of associations is vital, as is the collecting of background material. For example, Wicker collected material on Ferdinand Marcos, the Phillippine president, intending to write something about him but somehow never really having "an idea for it." Nonetheless, he knows that, given the nature of politics, he will eventually have another opportunity to write that story, once something in the news about Marcos triggers the idea he needs to organize it.

The accumulation of information thus can be either very specific, as in the gathering of material on Marcos for a piece that has yet to be written, or it can be random and continuous, as when Wicker travels to cover elections and acquires more information than he needs for the specific columns that will come out of the tour. As he says, the trip can be worth it "because I'll have that knowledge and that fills up my inventory up here which I need even though I don't write the piece"(Wicker, 1982). Much of the gathering of information comes from continual involvement in his profession, reading The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal regularly and keeping in touch with what other columnists are doing in order to avoid repeating what they've done or to discover something that sets off his own train of thought.



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Like most of the professional writers I talked to, Wicker wants to know fully what he's going to write when he sits down. Professional writers don't have the luxury of writer's block. Wicker says:

> The better prepared you are when you sit down, the easier it is to write the column...Being prepared is having a coherent idea, one that you can state rather briefly and simply, having the information to substantiate that idea, and having in your head or on paper or in outline....a sense of how you're going to proceed. All the information in the world won't make a good column unless there's an idea in it. (Wicker, 1982)

The search for an idea in both current events and long-term memory, the search for a connection between events or ideas which will produce the idea that leads to a column, is essential to every writer.

Richard Reeves writes, "A column, usually, is one idea expanded" (Reeves, 1981, p. 123). He described the process of his idea generation to me this way:

> I keep manila envelopes that I keep stuffing things into that might lead to future columns. At points where I feel barren or at points where it seems advisable, I'll flip through and there might be twenty notes to myself or clippings. Of those twenty my guess is that one out of four--might even be less than



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> that--eventually becomes a column. Usually I keep them there because I'm waiting for one other thing to happen that I think relates to it. (Reeves, 1984)

Reeves and Wicker are political columnists; they need to keep current with daily events. Their professional concerns keep them constantly in the process of acquiring information and dispensing it, and the acquisition of information produces spontaneous idea-generation that can only come about because they are so deeply immersed in the context of their profession.

The critics I talked to experienced some of the same things as the political columnists, but they also took a unique approach to the immediate problem of writing. Walter Kerr and David Denby, both writing weekly articles at the time I interviewed them, took similar approaches to responding to a subject. Kerr said this about his writing:

> Most weeks I start Friday, 1:00, and start transcribing the notes I took in the theater....from these little booklets....sorting the subjects into groups having to do with the principal characters or the structure of the play or whatever....By going through all the notes I put myself back in the mood of the play, as I felt when I was watching it. It becomes more real. I may have seen two other plays since that one, which tends to blur things for you or to neutralize them, but if you sit down and spend 45 minutes writing down



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> everything that struck you in the theater, then by the time you're through, you're sort of close to the experience again. (Kerr, 1982)

The experience for David Denby is very similar. After seeing a film and taking notes on it in the dark, a few to a page without looking away from the screen, he prepares to write three or four days later:

> I would see the movie Tuesday afternoon or Tuesday night and, say, Friday afternoon at home I would sit down with this note pad in my lap and some paper on a clip board and the cast and credits of the movie...and then I would try to replay the movie in my head using my notes as a memory aid, literally thinking it through, thinking what happens, trying to reconstruct at home what it was made me feel at that moment whatever it was I felt [in the theater]....I'll sit there and replay the movie in my head and then make fresh notes on my paper on the clipboard under separate headings....it may be as simple as writing down the word "theme" and then writing everything under that that deals with thematic development in the movie or writing the leading actor or actress's name and describing the performance or describing the elements of the director's work. I will then come out of [this process] with four or five pages of notes. (Denby, 1982)

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This ability to relive the experience of the play or film not only helps the critic recall the pertinent aspects of the experience but also gives him an opportunity to connect the experience with important ideas being incubated in the time between seeing the film or play and beginning to write about it. As Kerr says, "I can put it away for a couple of days and let it gestate all by itself and maybe it will throw up something I didn't count on or didn't realize" (Kerr, 1982).

Like the political columnists the critics were in search of a particular idea. Neal Gabler's experience is typical. He says of himself:

> I'm always scribbling things down [on notecards], whenever anything occurs to me that I think I might write about, even if I think it's not going to happen until a year from now....They're just sort of scattered all over the place, and I pick them up and they'll inspire me and I'll sit down and generally outline the piece very carefully before I write." (Gabler, 1982)

Gabler gives as an example of the way this process works by describing the genesis of an article called "Beach Blanket Cinema", about a number of recent coming-of-age movies. He had seen Porkie's in March of 1982, Diner in May or June, and Fast Times at Ridgemont High in August, and, as he does with every film he sees, he took notes on all of them. With the exception of Diner, a film he liked very much, none of



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these films seemed to him to be a movie worth writing about, but, as he says, Porkie's and Fast Times "reverberating off of one another sort of struck something in me and then when I thought of Diner...and what that says about adolescence, I saw a piece beginning to form in my mind." The success of Porkie's gave a greater impetus to the article because it suggested that there was a large audience for a certain kind of teen-age film. Gabler says, "the genesis of the piece was thinking about those two films and thinking that the issue was significant." Like the other professional writers I interviewed, Gabler could say of himself, "I'm always looking for connections" (Gabler, 1982). Indeed it is the ability to discover connections that makes all of these writers capable of generating articles at all.

The testimony of these writers concerning their idea-generating strategies demonstrates the importance of not only plans but also contextual knowledge stored in long-term memory. The work of the professional writer is facilitated by extensive storage of professional information, the materials which make connections possible. The professional writer is immersed in context and this immersion frees him from the short term demands of discovery that student writers typically encounter. The greater the understanding of the field or discipline or subject, the greater potential for making connections spontaneously. Spontaneity is a vital element of professional composition.



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That spontaneity, however, is a result of constant incubation, just as "spontaneous combustion" is actually the result of the slow build-up of flammable components over time. Looking at an analysis of his own writing, Donald Murray, who is both writer and scholar, claimed to be surprised by "the length of incubation time. I now realize that articles that I thought took a year in fact have taken three, four, or five years" (Murray, 1983, p. 171). Without that period of incubation, spontaneous idea-generation would be unlikely to occur.

All of the writers mentioned suggested in one way or another that they write to please themselves. Gabler and Wicker said so in exactly those words and Denby and Kerr used similar terms. The search for something which interests the writer can only take place when the writer is confident enough of his ideas and his skills to believe that they will generate an artifact of sufficient interest to readers. In other words, the spontaneous generation of a topic of interest to the writer can't happen until the writer has been sufficiently immersed in the context and sufficiently experienced in expression to have an instinctive or intuitive sense of what is vital, interesting, significant, and acceptable.

There may be practical applications to some of the methodology exhibited by these writers, but the evidence seems to suggest that there is a gulf between the



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professional and the student writer which is not solely the gulf of experience--it is also the gulf of knowledge. Professional writers make rapid strides in their writing once they have become immersed in the context of their writing. The clearest example from my study is Susan Nykamp, a writer who took her first job out of college as a newsletter writer for the Photo Marketing Association with very little background in photo retailing but with a solid background in journalism and composition; within two years she had become the managing editor of Photo Marketing, a slick periodical distributed nationally as the major organ of the professional association. What made the difference was the immersion in context, the growing sense of her field which allowed her not only to write articles on demand for an editor but to know by attending to the currents of the business what articles to assign, what issues to keep tabs on, what sources to turn to. By the end of two years she was at the top of that field because she had become an assiduous string-saver (Nykamp, 1982).

Our problem, then, is how to help our students find a context to draw upon. The time for planning, for generating ideas, is vital. Recognizing that need in his own writing prompted Donald Murray to change his own classroom practices "by allowing my students much more planning time and introducing many more planning techniques" (Murray, 1983, 171).

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We are really in the dilemma which was the root of controversy in classical rhetoric, that our instruction in rhetoric is mere cookery because our concern is with the presentation of knowledge and not its acquisition. Our answer has often been to provide formal heuristic methods which principally serve to generate information--Burke's Pentad; Young, Becker, and Pike's tagmemic heuristic; cubing; looping; webbing--in the place of actual knowledge. But such methods don't necessarily help the student to make the connections vital to either comprehension or expression. Faced with a fully completed particle-wave-field diagram, the student writer may still not be able to discover an idea worth expressing because he lacks the understanding and experience for spontaneity.

The gap then between the competent professional writer and even the competent student writer is a gap caused by the lack of context and the dearth of experience. Unless in our freshman composition courses we are simply to provide students with stop-gap measures to get them through until they develop experience in expression and immersion in context on their own in the normal course of growth and education, we have to develop the means of providing context and experience in our courses. In other words, in some ways the course itself has to become the heuristic method, just as the working writer's professional life is his or her

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heuristic, and just as, to some degree, our upper level courses already are.

Given the amorphous nature of the freshman composition course, such a context seems to be particularly lacking at the moment when students need it most. In order for them to achieve that immersion in context which leads to spontaneous idea-generation, we need to start teaching them to be assiduous string-savers.

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